Legacy

Ambitious people want to leave legacies, but what sort of legacies do they want to leave? The traditional criterion is that your importance is measured by the effect of what you do. Thus the most important lawyers are the Supreme Court justices, since their decisions affect the entire nation. And the greatest mathematicians are those that make important discoveries, since their discoveries end up being used by many who follow.

This seems quite reasonable. One's legacy depends on one's impact and what better way to measure impact than by the effect of what you've done. But this is measuring against the wrong baseline. The real question is not what effect your work had, but what things would be like had you never done it.

The two are not at all the same. It is rather commonly accepted that there are "ideas whose time has come" and history tends to bear this out. When Newton invented the calculus, so did Leibniz. When Darwin discovered evolution through natural selection, so did Alfred Russel Wallace. When Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone, so did Elisha Gray (before him, arguably).

In these cases the facts are plain: had Newton, Darwin, and Bell never done their work, the result would have been largely the same — we'd still have calculus, evolution, and the telephone. And yet such people are hailed as major heroes, their legacies immortalized.

Perhaps, if one only cares about such things, this is enough. (Although this seems a rather dangerous game, since the future could wake up at any moment and realize its adulation is misplaced.) But if one genuinely cares about their impact, instead of simply how their impact is perceived, more careful thought is in order.

I once spent time with a well-known academic, who had published several works widely recognized as classics even outside his field, and he offered some career advice in the sciences. (Actually, come to think of it, there are two people of whom this is true, suggesting the phenomenon has broader significance.) Such-and-such a field is very hot right now, he said, you could really make a name for yourself by getting into it. The idea being that major discoveries were sure to follow soon and that if I picked that field I could be the one to make them.

By my test, such a thing would leave a poor legacy. (For what it's worth, I don't think either person's works fall into this category; that is to say, their reputation is still deserved even by these standards.) Even worse, you'd know it. Presumably Darwin and Newton didn't begin their investigations because they thought the field was "hot". They thought through doing it they would have a significant impact, even though that turned out to be wrong. But someone who joined a field simply because they thought a major discovery would come from it soon could never enjoy such a delusion. Instead, they would know that their work would make little difference, and would have to labor under such impressions.

The same is true of other professions we misconceive of as being important. Take being a Supreme Court justice, for example. Traditionally, this is thought of as a majestic job in which one gets to make decisions of great import. In fact, it seems to me that one has little impact at all. Most of your impact was made by the politics of the President who appointed you. Had you not been around for the job, he would have found someone else who would take similar positions. The only way one could have a real impact as Supreme Court justice would be to change your politics once appointed to the bench and the only way you could prepare for such a thing would be to spend the majority of your career doing things you thought were wrong in the hopes that one day you might get picked for the Supreme Court. That seems a rather hard lot to swallow.

So what jobs do leave a real legacy? It's hard to think of most of them, since by their very nature they require doing things that other people *aren't* trying to do, and thus include the things that people haven't thought of. But one good source of them is trying to do things that change the system instead of following it. For example, the university system encourages people to become professors who do research in certain areas (and thus many people do this); it discourages people from trying to change the nature of the university itself.

Naturally, doing things like changing the university are much harder than simply becoming yet another professor. But for those who genuinely care about their legacies, it doesn't seem like there's much choice.

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